MAGDALEN TOWER.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

(SCENE—AT NIGHT.)

[The struggles of a young mind in his undergraduate days at Oxford to get at the heart of the mystery of life and the world.—J. A. A.]

I.

My brain is weary and my eyes are aching
With poring over long on Plato's text;
I'll make this stillest hour my own, forsaking
The buried lore with which my soul is vexed.
The air without is fresh and cool and moister,
I'll fling the narrow casement open wide
That looks athwart the silent court and cloister,
To view the world outside.

II.

Each dome and spire from North to South arises,
An island from a rolling sea of mist,
That fills with shadowy waves the vale of Isis,
All but the imperial city's queenly crest.
Above, the chilly moonbeams of October
Wrap round her sleepy form a gilded shroud;
Below, the fleecy sheets of vapor robe her
In folds of silver cloud.

III.

The blood-red creeper on the pale gray turret
Shows purple in the dim recess of night,
Save when the short-lived autumn breezes stir it,
Flashing a gleam of crimson in my sight,
And drooping ivy sprays that twist and dangle
Around the gloomy gurgoile's moldering mass,
Shed ghostly shadows on the dark quadrangle
Across the moonlit grass.

IV.

Hard by the clear-cut pinnacles of Merton
Rise black against the wan abyss on high;
The far cathedral steeple looms uncertain
Through intervening depths of hazy sky.
High in the tapering belfry of St. Mary's
The solemn clock knells out the stroke of three,
And fills with floating sound and weird vagaries,
The misty middle sea.

V.

These dreamy reveries of Plato mingle,
With shapeless cloud and voices of vague bells,
To bid each vein through all my body tingle,
And stir my brain through all its throbbing cells.
The city's form melts like the changeful vapor,
And these, her solid walls of massive stone,
Unreal as the fleecy robes that drape her,
Fade and I stand alone.

VI.

I know not if she be or if she be not:

Fade and I stand alone.

VI.

I know not if she be or if she be not;
I only know I am and naught beside;
I gaze abroad with timid eyes and see not
Beyond the mists by which my sight is tied.
The things I see and hear and feel around me
Merge in the single consciousness of thought;
Yet like an iron chain their limits bound me
With bands myself have wrought.

VII.

Is sentient life—set passive in the middle
Of fleeting sights and sounds, of joy and pain,
Yearning yet motionless, an awful riddle
Whose hidden aim we seek to read in vain;
Is life, so strangely shaped, a wanton creature
Of calm design, that heeds not human cares,
Or bastard offspring of unconscious nature
Begotten unawares.

VIII.

When chaos slowly set to sun or planet,
And molten masses hardened into earth;
When primal force wrought out on sea and granite
The wondrous miracle of living birth;
Did mightier mind, in clouds of glory hidden,
Breathe power through all its limbs to feel and know;
Or sentience spring, spontaneous and unbidden,
With feeble steps and slow?

IX.

Are sense and thought but parasites of being?
Did nature mould our limbs to act and move;
By some strange chance endow our eyes with seeing,
Our nerves with feeling and our hearts with love?
Since all alone we stand, alone discerning
Sorrow from joy, self from the things without,
While blind fate tramples on our spirit's yearning,
And fills our souls with doubt.

X.

This very tree whose life is as our sister,
We know not if the ichor in her veins
Trill with fierce joy when April dews have kissed her,
Or shrink in anguish from November rains.
We search the mighty world above and under,
Yet nowhere find the soul we fain would find—
Speech in the hollow rumbling of the thunder,
Words in the whispering wind.

XI.

We yearn for brotherhood with lake and mountain,
Our conscious soul seeks conscious sympathy,
Nymphs in the coppice, naiads in the fountain,
Gods in the craggy heights and roaring sea:
Yet find but soulless sequences of matter,
Fact linked to fact in adamantine rods,
Eternal bonds of former sense and latter,
Blind laws for living Gods.